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TEACHING COMPOSITION WITH FILM.

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A COMPOSITION PROGRAM DESIGNED TO GIVE UPWARD BOUND STUDENTS A FEELING OF SUCCESS WAS BASED ON FILMS WHICH THE STUDENTS VIEWED, DISCUSSED, AND WROTE ABOUT. THE FILMS FELL ROUGHLY INTO THE CATEGORIES OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS, POLITICS AND PROPAGANDA, AND ART AND MUSIC. FOLLOWING CLASS DISCUSSIONS, STUDENTS WERE REQUIRED MERELY TO "WRITE ABOUT THE FILM." THEN, IN INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES, THEY WERE ASKED TO READ THEIR COMPOSITIONS ALOUD, NOT ONLY TO EXPOSE RHYTHMIC AND SYNTACTIC PROBLEMS IN THE COMPOSITIONS, BUT ALSO TO FOSTER IN STUDENTS SOME FEELING OF COMMITMENT TO THEIR WORDS. THEIR PAPERS, WHICH WERE EXAMINED ONLY AS PRELIMINARY STEPS TOWARD GREATER ACHIEVEMENTS IN WRITING, WERE GIVEN NO GRADES. TEACHERS ATTEMPTED TO EXPAND THE STUDENTS' INTERESTS AND ENCOURAGE THEIR SELF-DIRECTION. AT THE FINAL MEETING OF THE UPWARD BOUND STAFF, THE SUCCESSES OF STUDENTS WERE DISCUSSED AND MEASURED IN TERMS OF WHAT THEY COULD DO, RATHER THAN WHAT THEY SHOULD DO. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "IDEA EXCHANGE," VOL. 3 (NOVEMBER 1967), 6-7, 28-29, AND IS REPRINTED IN "COLLEGE BOARD REVIEW" NUMBER 67, SPRING 1968, 13-15.) (HM)

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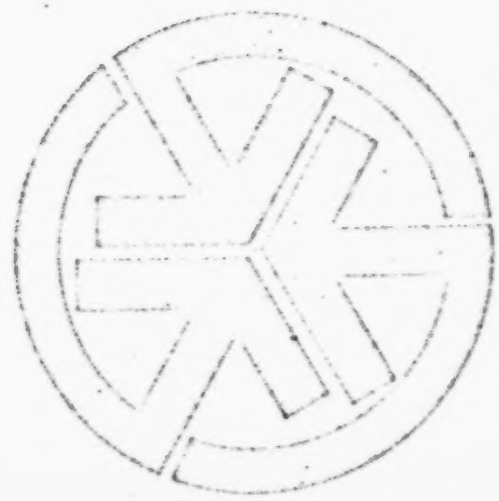

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TEACHING COMPOSITION WITH FILM

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To a teacher long accustomed to staring at the sleepy faces of upper middle class young men, teaching UPWARD BOUND students was a radical change. Often the faces were sleepy - students seem to need more sleep and to get less than other human beings - but never were they complacent, never did they say, "Come on, stop playing question and answer games with us. Just give us the 'perts' (pertinent points), so we can jot them in our notebooks and sling them back to you on the exam." The upper middle class young men know exactly where they are going. They attend college for processing on the assembly line that leads toward success as a stock broker, ad man or tax lawyer. But the UPWARD BOUND student is part of another process, the pattern of poverty - school dropout, manual laborer, unemployed.

The UPWARD BOUND students could not be complacent. Nor could we give them the standard processing. They had had that in their schools and it had branded them failures. They needed something different, a program predicated on a psychology of success.

We designed a program based on films. The students would see films, discuss them,write about them. The films fell roughly, sometimes very roughly,into three categories: social problems(NOBODY WAVED GOODBYE, THE CONNECTION, THE QUIET ONE, A PLACE IN THE SUN); politics and propaganda (MEIN KAMPF, THE BLACK FOX, THE SPANISH EARTH, TWO BEFORE ZERO); and art and music (LIVING JAZZ, STRAVINSKY, VAN MEEGEREN'S FAKED VERMEERS, A VISIT TO PICASSO).

The films, of course, were educational per se. NOBODY WAVED GOODBYE and A PLACE IN THE SUN suggested some of the problems of the social layers above poverty. The films about Nazi Germany informed and frightened a group for whom Hitler was as vague a menace as was the Kaiser for my generation. Even a very bad film like TWO BEFORE ZERO had a positive result. In a film with the premise that communism is the root of all evil, Nazi soldiers were shown in the role of victims of the Russians, Hitler was virtually ignored, and Franco became a hero. Some students learned that propaganda can be countervailed only with knowledge.

The discussions after the films were really bull sessions, often rambling and untidy compared with the precisely defined, carefully structured classroom situation. Nor did we narrow toward any "right answer." We showed the Picasso and Van Meegeren films on the same day and argued afterward about the nature of art.

"The fact that a different signature appears at the bottom of the picture shouldn't change its value. It's still the same picture."

"But if a man steals another painter's technique, then he goes through a mechanical process, like filling in the numbers with color. That isn't art."

"How can you say that those beautiful paintings by Van Meegeren aren't better than the ones we saw Picasso scribble during the films?" The students were

left with questions - but better questions than they could have asked before the discussion generated them.

The heart of the program was the individual conference. We asked the students to write about each film - no formal assignments, no "compare and contrast." When the student arrived at his conference he was asked to read his composition aloud - not merely because reading often exposes syntactic and rhythmic problems, but because we wanted the student to feel some commitment to his words, not merely to hand the essay to the teacher, making it suddenly the teacher's problem.

We got plot summaries, of course. But the student was able to see immediately how inadequate a substitute his summary was for the film. Soon he was going beneath the surface. And even plot summaries offered something to work with, to expand... something promising, something revealing a latent interest unknown even to the student.

One student began his summary of the SPANISH EARTH by saying, "This film kept showing men working on an irrigation ditch." In his paper the student kept returning to the ditch, as the film had done. That ditch must mean <u>something</u>.

"What did we see each time the film went back to it?"

"The work had gone further."

"Where did the ditch lead?"

"To a dry field."

"How did we feel about the ditch?"

"We wanted to see it finished."

"Right. Who was building the ditch?"

"Men who wanted to feed the defenders of Madrid."

"Right. The Republicans. So?"

A bunched brow, followed by a gleam of illumination . . . "So the film hooked us into rooting for the Republicans!"

"Of course. But even more basically,why were we rooting for that ditch?"

"Because we hate to see a dry field."

"How do we like to see a field?"

"Full of fruit and vegetables."

"Right. No matter whose field it is. And what even more basic appeal does the film make? Fluid flowing down a long cylinder to a dry field?"

Again, concentration... then a tentative "Man? Mother Earth?"

"Of course. The film appealed to a very positive instinct within all of us, whether man or woman. Jung calls it an archetype."

"A what?" With this student I had a chance to discuss Chaucer's "droghte of March" and Eliot's "handful of dust." He left, feeling he could have followed his opening sentence with a book.

It is important to note that he did not leave with a grade. He was free to work with ideas and ways of expressing them. His paper had been judged not as a finished product but had been examined as a preliminary step toward dimensions the student could not have predicted. He was relieved of the stultifying effort to "get a good grade." It is a cliche, but true - grades are, for too many students, the goal of academic endeavor. In our program, learning was not a means to a grade, but the goal itself. We aimed for moments of understanding, not for notes to be scribbled back to us on an exam. Thus, the student was free of a system which had already branded him a failure. He could only succeed.

The student was free of the grading system and so were we. We could not feel that our job was finished when we slapped a "C" on a paper accompanied by some note about "structure, specific examples, syntax." We might help our students with such comments, but we are often, unconsciously, of course, writing toward the grade, justifying it. It is not that we didn't measure the UPWARD BOUND students. We did; we measured them as individuals, attempting to expand their interests and encouraging their direction. We did not range them all on a scale from "A" to "E" and claim that our job was done. We did not translate them into so much IBMable data. We did not stamp them "finished." we stamped most of the "just started." Because we did not call ourselves an educational institution, we were free to educate.

Perhaps the most important aspect of a program which did not stamp numbers on human beings was that it did not force shallow answers upon deep questions - the questions our films were asking. We aimed intentionally for learning beyond the program as graded courses seldom do, inundating our students with questions.Not all of ▷28

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continued

these questions could be answered or even assimilated at once. But answers may come later, framed within the language and the grammar of individuals.

If man, as Sartre says, is condemned to freedom, we gave our students some hint of the terrors and challenges of the twentieth century and, above all, of how they must function in this context - as free men inhibited only by the choices they make. A few of our students, indoctrinated by their precious educational systems, found such responsibility bewildering. They wanted grades. The program left them asking shallower questions ("What's the catch?" "What would I have gotten on it if you had graded it?") than those of their contemporaries, who were well content to explore ideas free of their relationship to the artificial and irrelevant reward or penalty of a grade.

At our final meeting, the staff discussed each student in detail. I contrasted that meeting with similar meetings I had attended when I taught at one of America's most opulent prep schools. There, in our year end meeting, we discussed the boys who had failed in our incredibly structured, charted, and decimal pointed academic environment - the goal of which, of course, was Yale. Anything short of Yale(with the possible exception of Harvard) was failure.

But the UPWARD BOUND meeting discussed success. In some cases we had done as much as could be done for a student. He would graduate from high school. In most cases, students who two years ago were almost certain to drop out of high school to "earn some money" would go on to vocational schools, secretarial courses, and two or four year colleges. We measured students in terms of what they could do, not in te of what an arbitrary set standards said they shou do.

As our students move u ward from the poverty of their parents, they will able to do better for th children. We observe th classic American pattern the advance of generatio the pattern so tragically frustrated in our ghetto the pattern which might have been thwarted for a group of Maine youngster had it not been for UPWA BOUND. No longer need t be passive victims of ou worn dispensations like educational system which had branded them failure Now they are free to fol their own vectors, to dev op their own systems of tention. Several want t go into social work, "so can help kids like me." Perhaps some will learn enough to help the world avert the collision betw time and space which we the earlier twentieth ce tury have made so immine